
This brief section ends chapter four, "Playing for New Zealand," the preceding parts of which are all about Smith's triumphant 1897 rugby tour of Australia.

There was an enthusiastic crowd waiting to greet the team when the *Mariposa* arrived at Auckland. Cheering broke out as the ship docked and the team responded with their haka, and some of the aboriginal war cries they had learnt in Australia.¹ Then they were driven in horse-drawn brakes up to the Metropolitan Hotel in Queen Street (which specialised in hosting sports teams). There was to be one last game the next day, Saturday, against Auckland before the team finally disbanded.

Not too much was expected of the Aucklanders. They had performed poorly for several seasons, and had started off this season with an embarrassing loss to Thames. But a big crowd made their way by foot, horse or carriage, out to Potters' Paddock to see what their local team could do. When Auckland scraped home unexpected winners in the last minutes there was much excited celebration. In front of the grandstand "Substantial citizens might be seen cutting capers", wrote the *Herald* reporter, "with their hats reared high in the air at the end of their walking sticks."²

Auckland did play well, and Smith was so closely marked he could do little but defend. The New Zealand team, though, could hardly have been expected to be at their best. They had been cooped on board ship for several days beforehand, and the muddy ground was hard work after the hard surfaces of Australia. For most of them, too, the game was simply not that important, the tour was already over, and celebrations were already well underway before they docked in Auckland. Those celebrations continued through the weekend. The Sunday morning after the Auckland game several drunken team members offended church-going Aucklanders by parading up Queen Street barefoot with their boots on broomsticks, taking andwearing the landlady's bonnet, and other noisy misbehaviour. Several players were subsequently suspended after a Rugby Union enquiry.³

Smith, not one of the troublemakers, then joined the Auckland team as it prepared for an end-of-season tour to play Taranaki, Wellington and Wanganui. Beforehand there was a practice game against a club side which gave Smith a chance to work back into the team. It helped that one of the other outside backs was Absolum, his fast City teammate. Smith was back at centre and there were signs of impressive backline pace and combination. The following Monday they were farewelled by supporters at the Railway Station, before taking the train to the port at Onehunga

¹ NZH, 7 August 1897 p?

² NZH, 9 August 1897 p?

³ NZH, 12 August 1897 p?; *Taranaki Herald*, 19 August 1897 p?

wharves, and embarking on the all-day sea voyage down the west coast to New Plymouth.

The mid-week game against Taranaki was expected to be tough, after Taranaki's comprehensive victory the previous year, but Auckland won much more easily than expected, five tries to one. Perhaps the win against the New Zealand team had not been an aberration, and that they really were finally starting to show some exceptional form. Smith, reported the *Taranaki Herald*, was "undoubtedly the dandy of the three-quarter division"⁴ using his speed and swerve along the touchline to flummox the Taranaki defenders for two good tries.

The main, much anticipated, game of the tour was that against Wellington the next Saturday. Wellingtonians claimed their team as New Zealand's best, with some justification, as they had now not lost a home inter-provincial game since 1877. It was widely advertised and the newly arrived Governor Ranfurly had promised to attend. In keeping with the occasion the Aucklanders were put up in the city's best hotel, the Empire, on Willis Street. That raised some disapproving eyebrows, because of the rowdy reputation of touring football teams, but the Aucklanders were respectably behaved throughout their stay.⁵

The game took place on Wellington's new rugby ground, Athletic Park, up on the Beramphore hill to the south of the city. It was a rugged site, windswept, poorly drained and still with no spectator stands or facilities.⁶ The city's horse-drawn trams did not go that far, which meant that most spectators had to trudge uphill from Newtown. It was a calm fine day, however, and the very partisan crowd of 5000 was the largest, up to then, for a rugby game in the capital. Getting there was easier for the teams, of course. They were driven up by horse bus, preceded by a brass band.

It was an exciting, closely-fought game, long remembered. The ground was soft from recent rain, which favoured forward play, and the Wellington forwards soon dominated. The Auckland backs, on the other hand, were much superior to their opposites but had to spend most of their time defending. Smith managed to set up the first points for Auckland with a long sideline run and inside pass, but then Wellington kicked a goal to lead 4-3, and that was how the score remained until just before the final whistle. By then the home crowd were beginning to chant and cheer in expectation of yet another victory.

It was then that Smith produced another of his great footballing moments. He received the ball on halfway, surrounded by opposition players. Dodging and feinting through, he outpaced them with a long sprint, ran around the fullback and scored under the posts. Then, in the final seconds of the game, he did it again, beating man after man on another sixty metre dash to the corner flag. The Wellington crowd were

⁴ *Taranaki Herald* 19 August 1897 p?

⁵ *NZH*, 28 August 1897 p?

⁶ Tim Donoghue *Athletic Park: A Lost Football Ground* Tim Donoghue Publications, Wellington 1999, pp 8-10

stunned into silence. Their imminent victory had suddenly become comprehensive defeat.

Like so many other moments in his early career there were no photos of those last five minutes – just enthusiastic newspaper accounts, and word-of-mouth. The *Wellington Evening Post* reporter was typically impressed. Smith's "remarkable pace and cleverness", he wrote, "amazed the spectators and paralyzed his opponents. On this form [smith] must be considered the most dangerous back in New Zealand. There is no stopping this racing machine when once he gets a decent opening."⁷ His part in that Auckland victory was still being remembered many decades later.⁸

It had been a long season and by the end of it he had become one of Australasia's best-known rugby players. That summer there were several attempts to entice him away from Auckland. It was known he was looking for work, and there were rumours of offers from Thames,⁹ New Plymouth,¹⁰ and a club team in Sydney.¹¹ Around that time there were reports about undercover money payments to players in the Sydney competition, which may well have added some temptation.¹² However, Smith let it be known, if he could find a job he wanted to stay among friends, family and his familiar sporting scene. It is not known what work he got over the next year, but it was enough to keep him in Auckland.

Then, before the next rugby season, Smith astounded sports followers with the announcement that he was quitting all representative rugby. Surely, wrote one reporter, once the season started he would find "the fascination of the game too strong to resist."¹³ But he did, and for the next three seasons New Zealand rugby's new backline star limited himself to the occasional club game for his beloved City team.

Why did he do it? One reason was the Rugby Union's refusal to pay injury compensation. The long season had left him with a badly dislocated thumb that was very slow to heal and made labouring work difficult.¹⁴ He requested some compensation for medical expenses, but the Union refused him. That was the start of a long-standing irritation. Many years later one of his teammates in the New Zealand professional team that toured Britain in 1907-1908 remembered Smith's annoyance at the Rugby Union's refusal to settle "a 9 shilling account" and suggested it was the reason Smith turned professional.¹⁵ We don't know if this was the same 1897 grievance or a later one, and, as we shall see, there was much more behind Smith's

⁷ *Evening Post* 28 August 1897 Supp p?

⁸ Eg ??

⁹ *Observer*, 19 March 1898 p?

¹⁰ *Taranaki Herald*, 20 August 18897 p2

¹¹ *NZH*, 30 April 1898 p?

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Observer*, 7 May 1898 p18

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Interview with George Gillett, *Yorkshire Evening Post* 2 December 1911, quoted in *New Zealand Rugby League Annual 1996*

path to professionalism. But certainly there was lingering resentment at the way the amateur game treated injured working class players.

He would have been especially irritated too at the moralistic tone adopted by some commentators. One reporter, for example, wrote that such requests showed “a want of dignity and self respect” which “had been tried on in other parts of the colony, where players of undoubted capabilities, but suffering from swollen heads, have demanded such terms as would only be accorded first class professionals in the Old Country”.¹⁶

The main reason for giving up top-level rugby though, was a new enthusiasm for athletics, and especially the art of hurdling. He had dabbled in the sport the previous summer but now, as he took it more seriously over the 1897-1898 summer season, he began to realise that he could at least match the colony’s best. That required specialist training, however, which needed to begin in late winter, precluding end-of-season representative rugby with its injury risk. His ambition now was to become the best hurdler in Australasia, perhaps even the Empire, maybe the world.

¹⁶ *Evening Post*, 9 July 1898 p?